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University of Bath

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Capacidades de Desarrollo y Sociedad Civil en la Villas de la Ciudad (Development Capabilities and Civil Society in the Slums of the City of Buenos Aires)

Eduardo Lépore, Silvia Lépore, Ann Mitchell, Jimena Macció and Emilse Rivero, 2012

Editorial de la Universidad Católica Argentina, Buenos Aires, 302 pp., ISBN: 978-987-620-215-2

This book is the result of a collaborative research project led by a team of social scientists at the Catholic University of Argentina. The project sought to answer two research questions: how civil society organizations responded to the local needs of the inhabitants of the slums of the city of Buenos Aires, and what strategies for human development could be put in place. The research has more than answered its first question. The book provides a detailed assessment of people's quality of life from a human development perspective, and what civil society organizations do to improve their lives. In this sense, the book is extremely useful for researchers who seek to 'operationalize' the capability approach and put this theoretical framework into practice for assessing states of affairs.

The book presents extremely rich data about the kind of lives that people are living. While not using the capability jargon as such and its technical words of 'capabilities', 'functionings', 'opportunities people have to be and do what they have reason to choose and value', 'opportunities to achieve a set of valuable beings and doings' and the like, the study provides all the information needed for a rather exhaustive capability assessment of the slum's inhabitants. The book uses two main sources of information: national census data and national household surveys on the one hand, and in-depth interviews conducted in two specific slums on the other. In doing so, it follows the methodology widely used by capability scholars to assess situations from a capability perspective: using available data and participatory methods. But the book does not simply use the available data as they come, it uses them to tell a story of segregation between the slums and the rest of the city. We learn for example that a fifth of people living in the slums do not have access to sanitation, compared to 0.4 per cent for those living outside, or that 72 per cent of adults in the slums have not completed secondary education, compared to 24 per cent for adults living outside. This book is certainly pioneering in introducing inequality concerns at the heart of the notion of capabilities. By its treatment of available data, the book shows the deeply entrenched inequalities in the opportunities the inhabitants of Buenos Aires have to enjoy some valuable beings and doings, such as being adequately sheltered, being educated, doing meaningful work or living healthy lives.

An in-depth survey carried out in two specific slums complements the official available data and provide further information about how people fare in other valuable beings and doings which the capability literature highlights, such as 'taking part in the life of the community' through involvement in civil society organizations or electoral politics. The study could certainly have

included more information about additional valuable functionings such as enjoying recreational and green spaces, or being satisfied with one's life or having good relations with relatives and neighbours. An interesting finding from the interviews conducted with 480 families is that there are two functionings which they consider important but which they do not have opportunities for: moving securely from place to place and being free from drug-related violence, and living in a normal urban area with adequate public transport, infrastructure and decent housing.

The book contains a detailed inventory of all the civil society organizations which operate in these two selected slums and what they do. Most of them are dealing with nutrition and education. Surprisingly, less than a dozen organizations are addressing the problem of unsuitable housing and overcrowding and of drug-related violence. Unfortunately, the book does not explain why there is such a discrepancy between what capabilities people value and capability provision. The second question of the research project remains unanswered: how to put strategies in place for capability expansion? How to move from a situation in which people do not have opportunities to live in decent accommodation and move in a secure and peaceful environment to a situation in which they are? The book remains silent about these questions and does not address the reasons for which civil society organizations do not respond to what inhabitants see as their major capability deprivations.

The detailed assessment of how people are living provides some clues as to which reasons may lie behind this discrepancy – although the reader must do most of the thinking for him/herself. The interviews with the local population reveal that there is very little political participation at the local and national level. Hardly any inhabitant of the slums voted in the local elections or knew that there was a political body representing their interests. Some interview extracts also provide interesting anecdotes about the prevalence of clientelism and corruption in economic and political relations. This is a theme which would require a much lengthier treatment if one is to understand the processes which produce such capability inequalities within the city.

The capability approach is founded on an understanding of human freedom in its dual aspect of wellbeing and agency. This book represents an extremely useful analysis of the reality of the city of Buenos Aires from the first perspective of freedom: how well people live. But it falls short of looking into the second perspective: how people are agents of their own destiny and shaping their environment so they may live well. I hope there will be a follow up on this book to complete the operationalisation of the capability approach and illustrate how this theoretical framework can be used to transform realities and, to paraphrase Sen, make the world a little less unjust.

SÉVERINE DENEULIN © 2014

Séverine Deneulin is Associate Professor in International Development at the University of Bath, UK.